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Lights, Camera, Action...Cash: New Film Boss Aims to Bolster State's Coffers

Seven long years have passed since Illinois hit its peak as a show-biz hub. Back in 1999, with TV series such as "Early Edition" and Jeremy Piven's "Cupid" in full-time residence and major feature films -- including "High Fidelity," "Return to Me" and "Save the Last Dance" -- camped out for weeks and months at a stretch, revenue rolled in to the lovely tune of \$125 million.

Then it dropped -- and dropped again.

Nowadays, thanks to an infusion of cash from such high-profile projects as "The Break-Up," "Batman Begins," "The Ice Harvest" and the Fox television series "Prison Break," it's on the rise from post-9/11 abyss. In 2005, according to the latest state stats, Illinois pulled down \$94 million, bolstered in large part by Chicago-centric productions.

If new Illinois Film Office managing director Betsy Steinberg has her way -- and there's no guarantee she will -- the momentum will continue and there'll be triple digits once more. She starts officially on Monday.

Toronto, in particular, has snagged Chicago- and Illinois-bound projects with better tax incentives and a favorable exchange rate.

"I think a lot of these other locations that we're competing with don't have the level of work force, the really high-level professionals in the business," Steinberg, 41, says from her half-dismantled office at Loop-based Towers Productions, which specializes in documentaries and whose clients include A&E, the History Channel, TLC and the National Geographic Channel.

An English major in college and a St. Louis native whose late father was a top business executive, Steinberg spent almost half of her 18-year television and film career at Towers -- most recently as vice president of development.

Before that, she worked for seven years in Washington, D.C., with a political media guru named Bob Squire, who ran a small documentary film company on the side.

Now, amid boxed-up odds and ends, dusty ankle weights and going-away gifts (pink-and-white roses, wine, white-chocolate chip cookies) from colleagues, she's preparing to enter yet another phase of her professional life -- a very public one where interviews and photo-ops will be commonplace.

"The other thing that's really important about Illinois," she adds, slipping easily into marketing mode, "is that you cross the state north, south, east, west and it could be anywhere, anytime. There's an unbelievable amount of diversity here."

It's a true observation, though not a new one. And soon enough, Steinberg won't be preaching to converts.

"I'd say there's work to do to make it more clear to more people," says Jonathan Towers, her boss of only a few more hours and one of Chicago's most successful media figures, in his airy corner office. "Particularly for people on either coast."

"The future of this market in this city and this state in this industry is very bright, but people have to tell the story. And Betsy can do that."

Obvious qualifications aside, why her? In other words, how did she get noticed for this plum political post?

"I don't think it's that big of a stretch or a mystery," she says. "I was working for the largest production company in town in an executive position." She doesn't elaborate.

Hitting the ground running

Rich Moskal, who runs the Chicago Film Office and will work closely with Steinberg on a variety of projects, says there are definite challenges ahead. The first, it seems, is to maintain open lines of communication between the city and state offices. Asked whether that's always been the case in recent years, Moskal chooses his words carefully.

"When it's at its best," he says, "it's a partnership."

From a public relations perspective, Steinberg must vie for attention in a quickly burgeoning marketplace, convincing prospective clients that setting up shop in Illinois has benefits that go far beyond bucks. And that's harder than ever -- even with Illinois' 20 percent tax credit on intra-state spending as bait.

"It's very much a global industry and Hollywood has suitors all over the world who are trying to lure the dollars and the attention [by] offering great incentives," Moskal says. "And while I think Chicago and Illinois are offering great production value to include in that incentive, there's always somebody out there who's offering something sweeter."

Steinberg succeeds Brenda Sexton, a former commercial real-estate broker who courted Hollywood aggressively and pushed successfully for tax breaks that brought business back to the state during her four-year tenure. She was initially criticized, however, for everything from inexperience to landing the position courtesy of her rich ex-husband Blair Hull, a major donor to Rod Blagojevich's campaign. Steinberg has none of that baggage.

Which means, ostensibly, that she'll hit the ground running. Or at least jogging. The governor, among many others, is counting on it.

'I work well under pressure'

An Old Town resident of nine years, the single and petless Steinberg spends much of her little downtime in the neighborhood. On many evenings, she can be found savoring sushi at Kamehachi, screening films at Pipers Alley or sweating off "the nuttiness of the day" at an upscale gym near her one-bedroom apartment in a renovated century-old building.

Fortunately, it's that very nuttiness on which she thrives.

"Most people in this business like the adrenaline," Steinberg says before heading off to the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, where she'd schmooze with studio execs and talk up Illinois at soirees hosted by Sexton and the film office. "They like the rush of the excitement and the rush of getting everything done under pressure. I work well under pressure, I guess."

And there'll be no shortage of that in the months ahead.

She smiles. "Not that I've been losing sleep or anything."